

# Building Expertise

## Contractors' College teaches business fundamentals

Working through a construction-site punch list in February amounted to a business milestone for Shane and Aaron Warren.

The list noted all the final tasks that carpenters, plumbers, painters and other building trades people would have to do before the Warrens' job could be considered complete and the keys handed over to the owner. It was

branched into commercial construction. The brothers felt the diversification would enable them to better weather downturns in the economy.

They landed their first job, serving as general contractor for a retail space at National Harbor. Almost immediately, they won bids to build three other retail spaces at the Oxon Hill development. The four jobs drove

construction, the brothers say, was the Contractors' College organized by the Prince George's County Economic Development Corp.

The 12-week training program, held in 2008 propelled 10 small construction companies through lessons in construction accounting, project management, estimating, financing and other core business topics. The roster

the developers behind Prince George's largest projects, including Konterra, Westphalia and National Harbor.

Charlotte Ducksworth, director of the county's Small Business Initiative, said those mega-developments inspired her to embark on the two-year planning effort to create the Contractors' College.

"I saw the development that was happening," Ducksworth said. "I thought this is prime time. There will never be another historical time in Prince George's County where we have land, we have the ability to develop it and we have people interested in investing in the county, so why not have our local companies participate in that in a meaningful way?"

The 10 participating companies, selected from 35 applicants, received more than class time, Ducksworth said. Participating lawyers and financial professionals discounted their prices so they could spend time working individually with companies to improve their accounting practices, vet contracts, secure bonding and improve other back-office operations. Companies nabbed one-on-one meetings with major contractors and developers, and ultimately each company entered a multi-year mentoring relationship with a large construction firm.

"Can you imagine Shane and me walking up to the door of Coakley & Williams or the Peterson Cos. (in Fairfax, Va.) and saying, 'Could you show me how you operate?' It would never happen," Williams said. "But with this program, you are basically going up to this huge, \$200-million company and saying, 'Can you walk us through this, hold our hands and show us how we can be as successful as you are?' It's amazing."

Forrester Construction Co. - a Rockville-based general contractor that recently completed the renovation of historic Ford's Theatre and landed contracts to build a \$48 million headquarters for the District of Columbia's



CHRISTOPHER HARRIS

Builders Aaron Warren, left and his brother Shane, founders of Warren Brothers Group Inc., stand by retail space they built at National Harbor. The Warrens credit their success to the training they received at the Contractors' College organized by the Prince George's County Economic Development Corp.

routine for any general contractor, the last step before pulling out and collecting payment.

But for the Warren brothers, nothing about this job could be dismissed as routine.

Ten years after founding Warren Brothers Group Inc., a residential builder based in Upper Marlboro, the Warrens had realized a dream and

Warren Brothers Group revenues up 25 percent in six months in the face of a recession.

"We probably could have accomplished this on our own, but it would have taken us another three to five years to get where we are right now," said Aaron Warren.

The force that fast-tracked the company into commercial

of instructors included veteran lawyers, bankers, bonding agents and chartered accountants with expertise in the construction industry, leaders of some of the region's biggest construction companies, including Clark Construction based in Bethesda, Buzzuto Construction in Greenbelt and Coakley & Williams in Gaithersburg, and representatives of